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A Night on the English Channel: 1918

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

THIS item is being written on Saturday, April 29; when and if it reaches the printed page, Hitler's Western Wall may or may not have been invaded from the waves that wash it in the English Channel. Nevertheless, the thought strikes me that the scores of former students, who have sat in faculty classes on this campus, and who, this very night, are waiting for the green light, might be interested in reading even months or years from now about the other scores of former Ohio State students who invaded the French coast line some twenty-five years ago. The French invasion in 1918 assumed a much less hazardous scale than does the invasion today; but the hopes and the fears of the invaders were just as high and penetrating in War One as they are today.

April 29, 1918, fell on Monday, and in the vicinity of Southampton, England, the day dawned just as brightly as any English day could dawn at this time of year. Under full pack, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the members of a certain Infantry unit were assembled on a long dock that had been built by men of a U. S. Engineers Corps. As a member of that Infantry unit, along with the other men, I was waiting beside a small grey colored steamer. She had been christened La Belle, just why I do not know. Heavens knows, there was nothing beautiful about her. For years, so a member of her crew told me later that night, she had plied between Southampton and the Isle of Wight; and curiously enough, during the month of August, 1922, I crossed to Wight on her myself. But that short trip was not as eventful as the Channel crossing the night of April 29, 1918.

Shortly after three o'clock that afternoon, we were marched aboard the craft and immediately we settled down to eat some canned rations we carried with us. Members of the crew brewed some English tea somewhere below in the hold of the ship, and there was an exchange not only of food but also of ideas which helped to make for a certain spirit of camaraderie that arises in tense moments.

Darkness descended slowly and a cold, forbidding moon rose out of the black waters of the English Channel. Long after dark, La Belle's motors started to chug and by ten o'clock the ropes were loosened and La Belle started to move

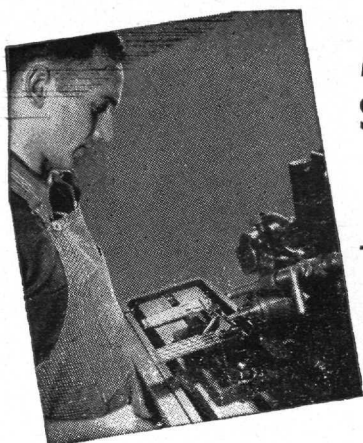
slowly out through the harbor. I recall that moment so well. I was standing on the stern, leaning on the rail with my buddy by my side. He was Johnny Schultz, a boxer of no little fame out of Toledo, Ohio. He was short and stocky; he had a fine Irish face, a shock of unruly blond hair, eyes of deepest blue, and the disposition of a saint. It might surprise you to know . . . it certainly surprised me . . . that Johnny is now a priest and a member of a chemistry department faculty in a well known mid-western university.

As La Belle started to slip from the dock, Johnny nudged my arm with his elbow and said almost inaudibly: "Well, Wilson, here we go! "Then there was complete silence. Scores of other soldiers standing and slouching about us said nothing. Gradually the receding English shore line faded into the darkness of the night and the steamer headed straight for the French coast, headed for the French coast and the great adventure. For several hours we hovered slowly along the shore, and about midnight La Belle put in at a small protected cove. Her engines stopped. Breathlessly, every one aboard looked toward the Channel. The reflection of the full moon cut a wide swath across the black waters, and over head the sky was brilliantly studded with stars. Then, after less than an hour, the engines started purring once again, and we headed with full steam ahead into that silvery reflection of the moon.

No one slept that night. Johnny and I curled up near a hawser. I may have dozed a little, but certainly not for long. Despite the crowded condition on board ship, most men paced the deck. The wind came up, and with her engines open wide the little ship rocked and rolled her way into mid-Channel. It was very cold, that certain brand of cold which, when accompanied with anxiety, cuts keenest.

When dawn came, La Belle was plowing through a heavy mist, a soaking, drenching mist. Hot coffee appeared in large G. I. cans, and with it our spirits began to rise. After all, we had weathered the Channel, and surely by this hour we were too near the French coast to be attacked by submarines. About eight o'clock the mist rose and there in the distance we saw the French coast line, a brilliant spring green dotted with

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the white of blooming fruit trees and the red of thatched roofs. The sun came out, and as we steamed into more quiet waters, the ship's engines slowed down and finally we came to rest at a floating dock in the harbor of LeHavre.

Several hours later when we walked down a gang plank from the scrubby little Belle, we fell in for formation on the famous cobblestone streets of France. The sky was dotted with barrage balloons swaying gently in a warm breeze; a large-busted madame was sweeping the walk in front of a shop bearing the words "Coiffeur: Service Antiseptique"; a droll-looking chap in cabots was arranging a sign in front of his establishment indicating that "Tabacs, Journaux, Cartes Postales" were sold there; second floor shutters were flung open and mademoiselles called "Où, là là, les Americaines"; and a sign painter at the corner cafe was printing on a large window those words welcome to every American, "On parle anglais ici". It was April 30, 1918, and Headquarters Company, 330th Infantry, had arrived in France.

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